



# NEW JERSEY FISHING REPORT

by Nick Honachefsky

Larger fluke finally came out of the shadows and began hitting in the northern part of the state, whereas southern Jersey anglers have been onto one of the best bluefin tuna bites in recent memory on the offshore grounds. Mix in the facts that the summer speedsters of bonito, Spanish macks and king macks are showing up in greater schools everyday and that the backwaters up and down are loaded with fluke, bluefish and even nocturnal striped bass. Hey, there, I hear you have a great recipe for fishcakes waiting to be used! Though fluke fishing for doormats will be in its prime in September, the NJ season on the summer flounder closes on September 10, so you need to get your fishing done fast.

## Raritan Bay

Fluke fishing exploded within the bay waters and scores of 5- to 7-pounders were hanging themselves on anglers' lines in areas such as the Chapel Hill Channel, TC Buoy, Romer Shoal, and Sandy Hook Channel. Some tackle shops reported that they didn't even bother weighing in 3- to 4-pound fish since they were littering the docks and shops. Snapper blues began their late July infiltration of the shallower bay waters up and down the bay shore, and anyone who took the time to procure and keep live the snappers for bait exponentially out-hooked other anglers when it came to flatties. Live snappers can be sent down on a three-way swivel rig or fish-finder sliding rig with a size 2/0 octopus hook for the best action.

Doormats began to rear their heads with more consistency as well in the R-Bay and 10-pound-plussers up to a 15.5-pounder were checked in at tackle shops. If you want to tussle with a steady stream of 4- to 7-pound flatfish, now's the time to hit R-Bay. Bluefish of 1 to 3 pounds made sporadic rushes into the bay on any given day, and plank fishermen off the Keansburg pier were able to find a few shots at keeper-porgies by dropping down squid strips. Historically, Raritan Bay is the best place to land doormat-caliber fluke through October, but since Jersey anglers only have 10 days in September to fish, you had better hit up the deep channels each of those 10 days or forever hold your peace.

## Northern Jersey

Believe it or not, monster strippers continued to be seen and caught off Asbury Park, Deal, Monmouth Beach and Avon as bunker schools took up residence off the coastline. It wasn't a slam-bang circus, but if you found the right school at the right time there were 25- to 45-pounders waiting underneath. One big day in mid-July had surfcasters once again on a bombastic bass bite off the Asbury Park and Long Branch jetties where Gibbs Pencil Poppers plucked out plenty of barrel-chested 30-pound-plus bass out of the bunker schools and onto the sands. Bluefishing out at the Mud Hole and Monster Ledge took a breather as the choppers went on the spawn, and for about a two-week period, catches were harder to come by. That fishing bounced back in early August, as 6- to 15-pounders once again went on the chew.

Sea bass fishing has been successful on the inshore reefs such as Sandy Hook and Sea Girt, with many keepers being caught, at least enough to get some good dinner fillets. The black sea bass seem to have surged into the shallow water structures, and fluke trips are nicely sprinkled with keeper sea bass, some of which have been hitting the 3-pound mark. Squid strips and spearing on white bucktail teasers have been key to getting a good

set of strikes. Fluke fishing has stuck very close to the beachfront in 15 to 30 feet of water with the flatties many times right outside the breakers. Party boats are pulling larger fluke off the structure and underwater debris of the Rattlesnake and assorted half-mile wrecks and larger 3- to 4-pounders are coming up with more regularity. Try using long strip baits from bluefish, bunker or mackerel, or simple two spearing on one hook for a hit.

The Shrewsbury Rocks had a solid mix of bass and blues most days, but more importantly, sea bass could be found here, as well. Smaller bluefish have been storming the beachfronts off Sandy Hook as 1- to 2-pound tailors are chasing after small 007 metals and Deadly Dicks. Fluke also have been picked up in the surf off Monmouth Beach and Sandy Hook, with twin spearing rigs and Berkeley Gulp! minnows convincing the fish to bite.

## Central Jersey

Fluking rebounded inside the Manasquan River, and channel drifters found flatfish eagerly chomping on Gulp! minnows and squid and killie combos. The area by Wills Hole Thorofare was a secret hot spot that was holding some 3-pound class fluke for some kayakers who were able to sneak back inside the skinny area. Hickory shad stormed the Manasquan Inlet almost every evening with anglers tossing out sabiki rigs and teasers to pull on some of the good fluke strip baits. I spoke to a diver on the Manasquan Inlet and he said that the jacks are loaded with 5- to 8-pound blackfish and some doormat fluke - just a little food for thought!

Barnegat Bay continued its pick of fluke in Double Creek Channel, and spike weakfish finally moved on inside the bay in such spots as Meyer's Hole and by the BB Buoy. The weakies were hitting on grass shrimp and shad darts and ranged from 8 to 18 inches. The Barnegat Ridge was a super spot for the first shot of bonito that moved into the area, and trollers were getting over a dozen on each trip on the south ridge. One commercial guy I talked to said that he had not only loads of bonito in his nets, but a mess of Spanish mackerel and 1,000 pounds of king mackerel! That presence of kings is very unusual for our area.

The Manasquan Ridge, only five miles off, had plenty of bonito and Spanish mackerel hanging over its humps and bumps with small feathers and Clark spoons tackling the speedsters.

As September rolls on, look for the speedster fishing to hit its peak. Triggerfish are hanging tight to the north and south jetties of the Barnegat Inlet, mainly on the inlet sides, and are nipping at small clam bits fished on the bottom. The Island Beach State Park suds gave up sporadic action on 25- to 35-pound strippers mainly for those who fished during the nighttime hours with bunker heads.

The big news, and I mean big, was that sharks of all types and sizes came storming into the surf and near shore waters. Surfcasters from Lavallette through IBSP have been pulling in brown sharks to 60 pounds and humungous smooth dogfish up to four feet long from the surfcasting bunker heads. Personally, I beached a smooth



**Nick Honachefsky and Capt. Bill Jenkins hold this 60-pound dusky shark caught a mile off the beach. It was released.**

doggie that taped out at 60 inches, two inches longer than the present world record! No doubt, it had to go over 30 pounds and I absolutely broke the state record at 19 pounds, but I released it back into the surf. Other reports had blue sharks, threshers and makos fighting each other over the bunker schools at the Sea Girt Reef, only two miles out!

## Offshore

The bluefin bite is absolutely insane! You name the spot, Massey's Canyon, 19th Fathom Lump, Sausages, Hambone, Tea Cup - the waters just south of Cape May are holding monster bluefin of 100 to 200 pounds, larger than in years past. The horses are hitting the jig, the chunk and the troll. Trollers are having luck with blue and white Ilanders rigged with medium ballyhoo, jiggers are dropping down 16-ounce butterfly jigs, and chunkers are using butterfish to bring the bluefin to boatside. What a fishery going down! Out at the Elephant's Trunk, 60-pound class yellowfin have been trolled up along with the 100-pound class bluefins, as well as some 10- to 20-pound mahimahi. Offshore in the bluewater, the 40- and 50-fathom lines of the Wilmington have been the ticket for yellowfin and mahi, though stray 150-pound bluefin are jumping on lines also. The Hudson has yet to get any real activity going on since the southern canyons are seeing most of the blue water so far.

The 16th Annual Mid-Atlantic Tuna Tournament took place at South Jersey Marina and had a mess of bluefin over 100 pounds checked in, with a 191-pounder taking all the dough. Second was taken by a 188-pounder. Many anglers have switched from sharking to tuna fishing, and sharks are out and about, no doubt, with threshers being taken in the Glory Hole, Triple Wrecks and Varanger wrecks along with still-consistent mako activity. Mud Hole fishermen were delighted to find schoolie bluefin move into the 20- to 40-mile range as spots like the Glory Hole and Arundo saw 30- to 50-pound class bluefins with some larger specimens spooling anglers' lines. In September, we may just see a surprise bluefin fishery anchor down in the Mud Hole. Cross your fingers!

This has been one of the hottest summers on record, and I'm not talking about the weather! Let's hope the fishing keeps its torrid pace right through September.